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[DEC 14 MEJ] From the Academic Editor

Religious Music in Public Schools: Mixed Messages from *MEJ*

by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

Fewer than ten *Music Educators Journal* articles have addressed the ethical or legal standing of sacred music in public school curricula—in more than one hundred years of continuous publication. That number is quizzically low given the amount of related discussion in various parts of the country such as the southeastern United States and in sung, text-based genres of our field such as general and choral music education. The first article to question the role of sacred music in public schools appeared in 1966. Fifteen years passed until several articles were printed in the years between 1979 and 1986. A second group of related articles began appearing in 2008 and continues with Tim Drummond's article in this issue.

It was the custom that many of the articles published in early volumes of our journal began as speeches for conferences or professional meetings. W. G. Whittaker's address to the 1929 Anglo-American Music Conference in Lausanne, Switzerland was printed at the request of editor Paul J. Weaver under the title "The Use of the Classical Song in School" (*Music Supervisors' Journal*, October 1929). Whittaker's article was the first to isolate the topic of sacred music as curriculum in public schools. The opening paragraph (it was originally spoken) is one of the most unexpected in our journal's history:

The subject of my paper is not of my choice; it seems to me that there is little to be said on it which is not a matter of common agreement, about which there can be no possible shadow of doubt whatever. But it was insisted on by the committee, and I shall do my best with it. (p. 17)

Whittaker interpreted the word “classical” to mean “songs written by the best composers of the past” (p. 17). Along the route to explaining the role of classical music in schools, Whittaker touched on the problems with nationalistic and folk-derived songs (pp. 19 & 21), age-appropriate content (p. 23), and the perils of integrated curricula (p. 27). Whittaker considered sacred music as a subset within the larger canon of classical repertoire. His discussion was similar to the large majority of *MEJ* articles on the subject: sacred music was to be used with the same discernment applied to all other genres of music.

The situation changed with the advent of the a cappella choral movement in the late 1920s. During this period, junior high and high school choral programs throughout the United States were redesigned to emulate newly prominent a cappella choirs at collegiate institutions such as Westminster Choir College, St. Olaf College, and Luther College. This marked the beginning of conversations and controversies about the role of sacred music in public schools, stemming largely from centuries-old religious traditions in the choral repertory.

The first article to substantially focus on the use of sacred music in public schools was E. H. Wilcox’s “A Cappella—a Definition with Observations” in March 1933. Wilcox explored the role of choral music in various types of churches, and included this recommendation for choirs of all types, whether in churches or schools:

Every modern organization that wishes to call itself an a cappella choir will want to study the sacred music of this period. Every program by an a cappella choir should include sacred numbers to give point to the name of the choir. (p. 32)

The famed American composer Howard Hanson, then Director of the Eastman School of Music, made an even more overt connection between schooling and sacred

repertoire in “Music in its Highest Fulfillment” (*MEJ*, May-June 1935). Hanson opened his article by heralding “the ultimate purpose of our endeavors as teachers; the goal toward the realization of which the great organizations of our profession are striving” (p. 13). He concluded his article by defining that purpose: “This, I believe, is our greatest task, yours and mine, is to make straight the path, toward that day when music will once again serve its God” (p. 14). It is noteworthy that *MEJ* readers in 1935 would have been aware that the journal was “The Official Organ of the Music Educators National Conference.” Several subsequent articles focused on the rehearsal and performance of sacred music in churches, such as “Church Music After the War—and Now” by Noble Cain (*MEJ*, November-December 1944, pp. 23-24).

The first *MEJ* article to seek clarification of sacred music’s role in public school education was the 1966 article by Charles M. Fisher, “The Place of Religious Music in the School Curriculum.” Fisher’s brief commentary is extraordinary. Readers are commended to consider the excerpts below and then turn to Tim Drummond’s article on Page XX of this issue, “Singing Over the Wall: Legal and Ethical Considerations for Sacred Music in the Public Schools.” Fisher began the discussion that Drummond continues a half-century later.

**Excerpts from “The Place of Religious Music in the School Curriculum”
(*MEJ*, November 1966)**

One might say that all texts which throw light on great truths are religious. All music which reveals the nature of the universe is essentially religious, and here one may include much instrumental music too, which has the power to elevate and even to cleanse and purify. One can listen to a Beethoven symphony without praising God for it or for whatever it may do to uplift the spirit, but if it has any recreational effect on the listener or player at all, in the sense of re-creating his orientation to his existence, it has been a religious experience. Consequently, in the study and performance of good music, one cannot escape the religious impact which is always a potential therein. (p. 66)

Rather than be concerned about this matter of avoiding church relatedness in school music, music educators should question the presentation of music which has *no* religious content—music that is trivial, shallow, or stimulates low motives. (p. 66)

What then about the place of religious music in the school curriculum? It seems that this is much like the place of ethics in business or the observance of religious principles in social relationships. It is in these realms of practical application to life where religious counts the most. If religious principles are observed only in the temple, it is entirely in opposition to the greatest teaching of all ages. (p. 67)

Most of the music that is used [in schools] must be of significant worth, both as music and as poetry, in terms of the age in which we live. This is, of course, religious music. Regardless of any court decision, and, in this sense, there must be a very large place for religious music in the school curriculum. (p. 67)